

LOS ANGELES TIMES

MAR 8 1964

# A-11 JET OBVIOUSLY PLANNED AS SUCCESSOR TO U-2

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BY MARVIN MILES

There is little doubt that the triplesonic A-11 jet aircraft disclosed by President Johnson last weekend was intended originally for secret reconnaissance missions as a sky-spy successor to the U-2.

Even the President's guarded announcement of the plane fell into place as a tip-off later in the week.

The United States, he said, had successfully developed an advanced experimental jet aircraft which had been tested in sustained flight at more than 2,000 m.p.h. and at altitudes in excess of 70,000 ft.

Not until he was halfway through his announcement did Mr. Johnson mention—almost as an afterthought—that A-11 planes now at Edwards Air Force Base are undergoing extensive tests "to determine their capabilities as long-range interceptors."

## Strong Indication

Such cautious reference to the plane's military role, together with other facts developed during the week, is a strong indication that the A-11 started as a secret reconnaissance craft and later was re-oriented for straight military missions.

The super-secret manner in which the plane was funded and developed over a period of five years is a primary factor in pegging the A-11 as initially a sky-spy craft. Certainly no combat plane has ever been shrouded in such massive secrecy for such a period.

The fact that top Air Force generals and congressional military committees have been urging the development of an improved manned interceptor—and actually recommending \$40 million in funding in the case of the House Armed Services Committee—scarcely upholds the picture of the A-11 as an interceptor from inception.

It could indicate (1) that reorientation of the secret aircraft from sky-spy to interceptor was decided only recently or (2) that top military and congressional experts are not satisfied that the plane—in conversion—can be effective as an interceptor.

There is also the fact that the USAF had a long-range triplesonic interceptor program underway in 1959—the North American F-108

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and cancelled it in that year under administration budgetary pressure. This was the same year the A-11 was undertaken in secrecy.

Why abandon a well-organized development program for one 2,000 m.p.h. interceptor to undertake a new, and secret aircraft of the same performance for the same mission?

It can only be concluded that the A-11, initially, was not an interceptor; that the U-2 had already lived beyond its expectations as a sky-spy aircraft and that a secret, follow-on reconnaissance plane of superior performance was deemed mandatory.

## Several Reasons

Why, then, was the new Lockheed plane eventually re-oriented to an interceptor role? There are several possible reasons, military and political:

1.—That the development of Samos sky-spy satellites over the intervening years has proved so effective for reconnaissance that manned aircraft are no longer required for secret intelligence missions.

2.—That development of Soviet radar tracking and anti-aircraft missile effectiveness—beyond the shot that brought down CIA pilot Francis Gary Powers and the U-2 on May 1, 1960—has outmoded high-altitude reconnaissance flights by conventional jet aircraft.

3.—That increasing pressures for an advanced manned interceptor (IMT) in an election year (possibly combined with one or both points above) brought an administration decision to re-orient the sky-spy plane and herald it as a coup in advanced manned interceptor development.

The controversial supersonic transport program also may have influenced the decision.

In this connection it was noted that President Johnson, in his announcement of the new plane, alluded to commercial gains in the A-11 program before he spoke of the aircraft's possibilities as a long-range interceptor.

The primary accomplishment here—and indeed a major one—is fabrication of the high-strength, lightweight, heat-resistant metal—titanium—that permits sustained triple sonic speed, high air friction temperatures that would cause failure in lesser metals. Without titanium it would be necessary to use stainless steel at double the weight.

## Metallurgical Feat

Titanium has been costly and extremely hard to fabricate. The cost is down, however, from \$5 a pound a decade ago to \$1.32 per pound today and mastery of its fabrication in the A-11 represents a breakthrough, not only for military aircraft, but for commercial programs such as the supersonic transport and for spacecraft as well.

The metallurgical feat achieved in the A-11 boosts the supersonic transport program materially and would seem to give Lockheed a leg up in competition for the development.

A dozen A-11 aircraft are already flying with the same type double-delta wing configuration pro-

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